

Dealing with Absent Landlords

Guidance note prepared by Neil Wild, High Streets Task Force Mentor and Facilitator, and Director, Wild Property Consultancy.

—

A common challenge for place managers can be tracking down property owners or getting responses from them on specific issues. A need has been identified for a national Landlords' Register and Government is exploring a pilot for such a register.

In the meantime, there are several approaches that towns could take to address this challenge. In this short guide, we look at providing support and instructions to support landlord engagement that can be pursued locally.

Background

A place management strategy that does not engage with property owners is potentially missing an important component.

The makeup of property ownership will vary from place to place. Sometimes the town or urban place may be dominated by two or three significant owners whilst in others each high street shop might be owned by a different company or person.

Commercial property ownership in the majority of cases is via the landlord and tenant model, underpinned by the commercial lease. It is only in rare cases where town centre property is owner occupied. Commercial property is an investment asset class with the owner expecting a regular income stream or a return on their capital outlay.

Property owners themselves vary. Traditionally, high street shops were once owned by large pension funds and other financial institutions. This has changed over the last 30 years with these larger entities and their retail property allocation concentrated within shopping centres or other large blocks of retail property (supermarkets, retail warehouse parks or out of town centres). Many high street shops are either now owned by private individuals or by small to large property companies. These individuals or property companies might be full time and experienced organisations with a clear asset management strategy whereas others might be run part time by the owner or directors who have other preoccupations or vocations. What is clear is that owners vary and so does the amount of time they can give to management of their property.

With property changing hands on a regular basis it's important to keep up with who owns the property in your town or urban place. The following is advice as to differing ways of engaging with property owners.

This advice is not exhaustive and intended for others to comment and, via suggestions, for this list to grow.

Property Agents and Managers

Many property owners will engage an agent. This might be for the management of the asset or the engagement might be confined to the period when the lease has expired, or close to expiry, and the landlord is suffering from what is known as a rental void. It is well worth trying hard to engage with the agent and through them with their client.

The response from an agent will vary considerably but their engagement will be vastly improved if you can demonstrate what it is you are trying to achieve or learn. For some, the knowledge of a local database of ownership might be enough for them to engage with you but others will regard this as protected or private information, and may cite data protection legislation.

Some owners will rely completely on their agent to advise them and to do the work for them whereas others will remain more involved, proactive and keen to engage with the place in which their investment is located. If the agent is not especially forthcoming then a tactic might be to ask the agent to forward to their client a letter of enquiry from you, setting out a vision strategy for the town and how knowledge of property owners and their engagement in the process is vital.

Land Registry

You can search for property information from [HM Land Registry](#). This is typically a simple and low cost option. During the first period of Covid-19 national restrictions in England, the facility was not available but it is back online and well worth using on a regular basis.

The cost of obtaining a copy of the Register is £3 plus a further £3 if the plan is also required. The plan can be useful where the street address is ambiguous, simply to confirm that you have obtained the document for the correct property. The facility needs a postcode and usually the street number. It's best to select the freehold entry but in certain instances the leasehold information might be more useful.

Do be aware that there are other non government websites that offer a similar facility. The information provided to you by Land Registry will include the owners name, address and then other information can sometimes be included such as date of purchase, purchase price, whether the property is subject to any charges or mortgages and in some instances whether it is subject to a lease (a lease of 7 years or longer should be recorded on the Register).

Companies House

Where the property owner is a limited company, then a search via [Companies House](#) website is possible. Getting information about a company is **a useful next step to obtain company director names and other address details**. This service is free of charge.

Planning Records

A significant amount of information regarding a property can be found on the planning websites of a local authority with planning applications and accompanying documents on line going back many years, covering permitted and refused applications as well as live applications. These will list the name of the applicant (usually the owner), their address and name. In many instances an agent is used to submit the application and whilst this can then hide some of the information you might require, it does give another point of contact and in some instances this person might be less remote than the owner.

Property Intelligence Companies

One of the leading players in the UK market is now the American owned research firm, Costar. Many property owners and agents subscribe to their service which captures many property related pieces of intelligence including ownership as well as transactional data on land and property sales and leases. Costar have acquired the Land Registry data as well as having a large team of analysts which tracks deals and data for the benefit of their subscribers. An increasing number of local authorities are now also subscribing to this platform.

Summary

The above can provide you with the factual information you need but won't necessarily give the personal contact details or certainty you have found the correct individual, which brings us back to working hard to engage with the property agent. It's not going to be a quick and easy process to gather the data for your place but **over time it will be possible to form a useful working document which might form part of the overall asset register and audit of your town or urban space.**

About the author

Neil Wild



Neil is appointed as a High Streets Task Force Mentor and Facilitator.

He is Director of Wild Property Consultancy (Oxfordshire), a Member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and of the Institute of Place Management. He also serves as Chair of Banbury & District Chamber of Commerce.

www.wild-property.co.uk

“For over 25 years I have visited towns and urban places up and down the country. These places represent home to a community of people each deserving a vibrant place with a diverse offering & well-loved public spaces.”
